

Wampanoags gather to revive tribal heritage

RECLAIMING THEIR HISTORY



Debee Tlumacki photos/The Patriot Ledger

Members of the Wampanoag tribe explain aspects of their culture to visitors at Plimoth Plantation yesterday.

By John H. Boit
The Patriot Ledger

Her voice quivering with emotion, 24-year-old Eleanor Jackson stood in the audience of 100 people in Plymouth and spoke.

"I'd like to know a lot about my heritage, to learn my language and hope to teach my child," Jackson, a Wampanoag from Mashpee, said to the applause of the crowd.

She's not alone.

More than 1,000 Wampanoags and others converged on Plimoth Plantation this weekend for "Four Hundred Years of Wampanoag History: Visible Images/Invisible People," an emotional two-day seminar where everyone from scholars to tourists discussed the tribe's nearly forgotten history.

At times the discussions were academic or political, coinciding with the 25th anniversary

of the plantation's Wampanoag Indian Program.

Other times it became a spiritual renewal, as Wampanoags like Jackson tapped into 10,000 years of culture.

"Look what's happened here in the last two days," Maurice Foxx, a panelist and acting chairman of the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs, said yesterday. "We have to let people know who we are. We will not go away. We are here and we always will be here."

Before the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620, Wampanoags numbered in the tens of thousands — possibly as many as 200,000, Foxx said. Their lands stretched across Rhode Island and eastern Massachusetts, including Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.

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Today, there are 1,300 to 1,500 Wampanoags living primarily in Mashpee and on Martha's Vineyard, he said.

The weekend seminar covered the Wampanoag history from 1620, when the Mayflower arrived, carrying with it the first large wave of European settlers.

Pushed off the land they had held for 10,000 years, killed by smallpox and in battle with settlers, the Wampanoags were forgotten by historians, tribal leaders say.

Now they are beginning to reclaim their ancestry.

They have contacted more than 70 museums asking for the return of artifacts and their ancestors' remains. They are hoping to raise as much as \$200,000 to open a Wampanoag museum in Mashpee by July 1999.

One key to reviving the Wampanoag culture is unlocking the secrets of its lost language. Jesse "Little Doe" Fermino, a graduate student in linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, hopes to complete the first Wampanoag dictionary within two years.

She has nine devoted students who gather one evening a week in a Mashpee community room to speak the sounds not heard for generations. Fermino is using a Bible translated into Wampanoag in 1655 as one of her main sources.

Syllable by syllable, the language is being rebuilt.

"They are speaking it. One person used it to insult another the other day," Fermino said with a laugh.

But the project also has given her an idea of the depth of misunderstanding about her heritage. People often ask her why anyone would want to speak a forgotten language.

"Most of the time I just don't bother to answer that," Fermino said. "It's just so beyond ignorant, I don't even bother."

Learning the language is one way for Wampanoags to tell their side of the story.

"American history is written by people of European extraction. They wrote their versions. The fact we were colonized is not really described in an accurate way," said Russell Peters, president of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council.

Wampanoags have gained national attention in recent years, in part because of protests staged in Plymouth each Thanksgiving.

Protesters have said that a Thanksgiving procession through town called the Pilgrim's Progress glorifies the slaughter of Native Americans.

This weekend was a chance for Wampanoags to celebrate a people nearly eliminated by European colo-

nization.

The conference included Wampanoag music, dancing and dramatic interpretations of Wampanoag history.

The event drew people from as far away as Minnesota, Virginia and Maine.

"It's the first time to hear the interpretation of the Native Americans," said Stefano Gustincich, 34, an Italian neurobiologist who stumbled on the conference as he visited the plantation with his wife.

The conference, which is expected to become an annual event, came to a close with a traditional snake dance.

Led by a dancer stepping to the rhythm of turtleshell rattles, more than 50 Wampanoags and others twisted through the crowd as a symbol of unity.

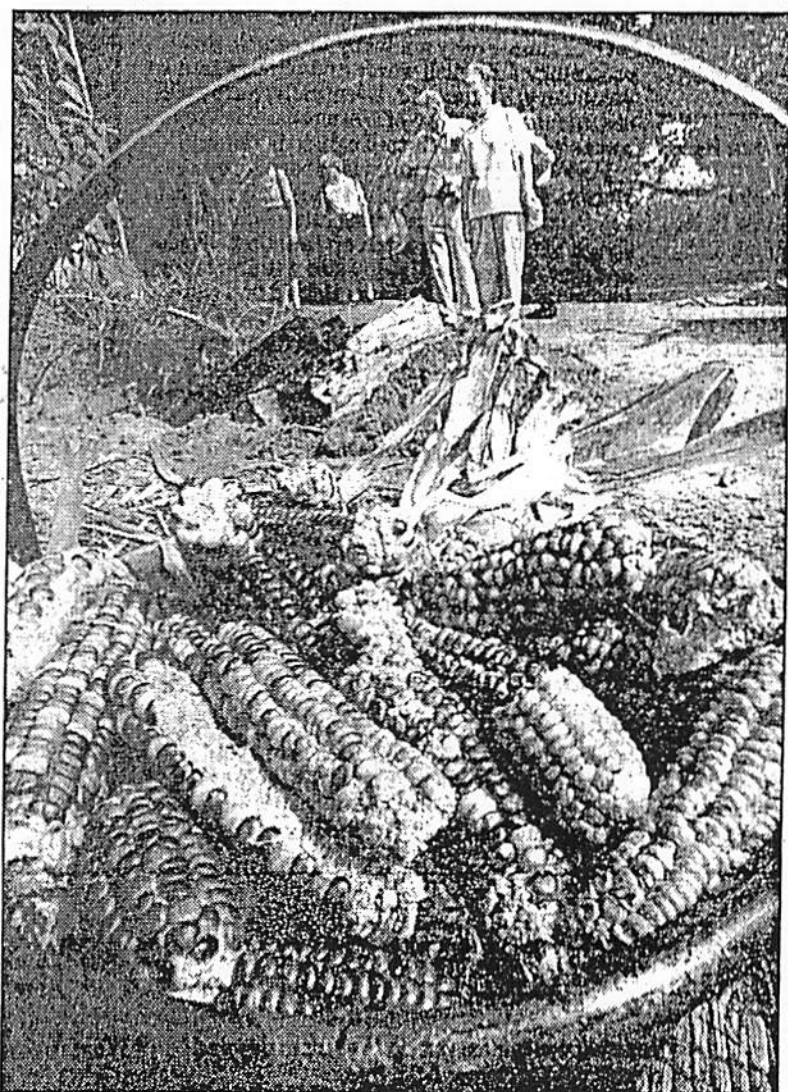
"It fills my heart to see them all together," Linda Coombs, associate director of the plantation's Wampanoag Indian Program, said after she finished the dance.

One of the people stepping to the rhythm was Jackson, the woman who vowed to learn the Wampanoag language so she can pass it on to her 2-year-old daughter.

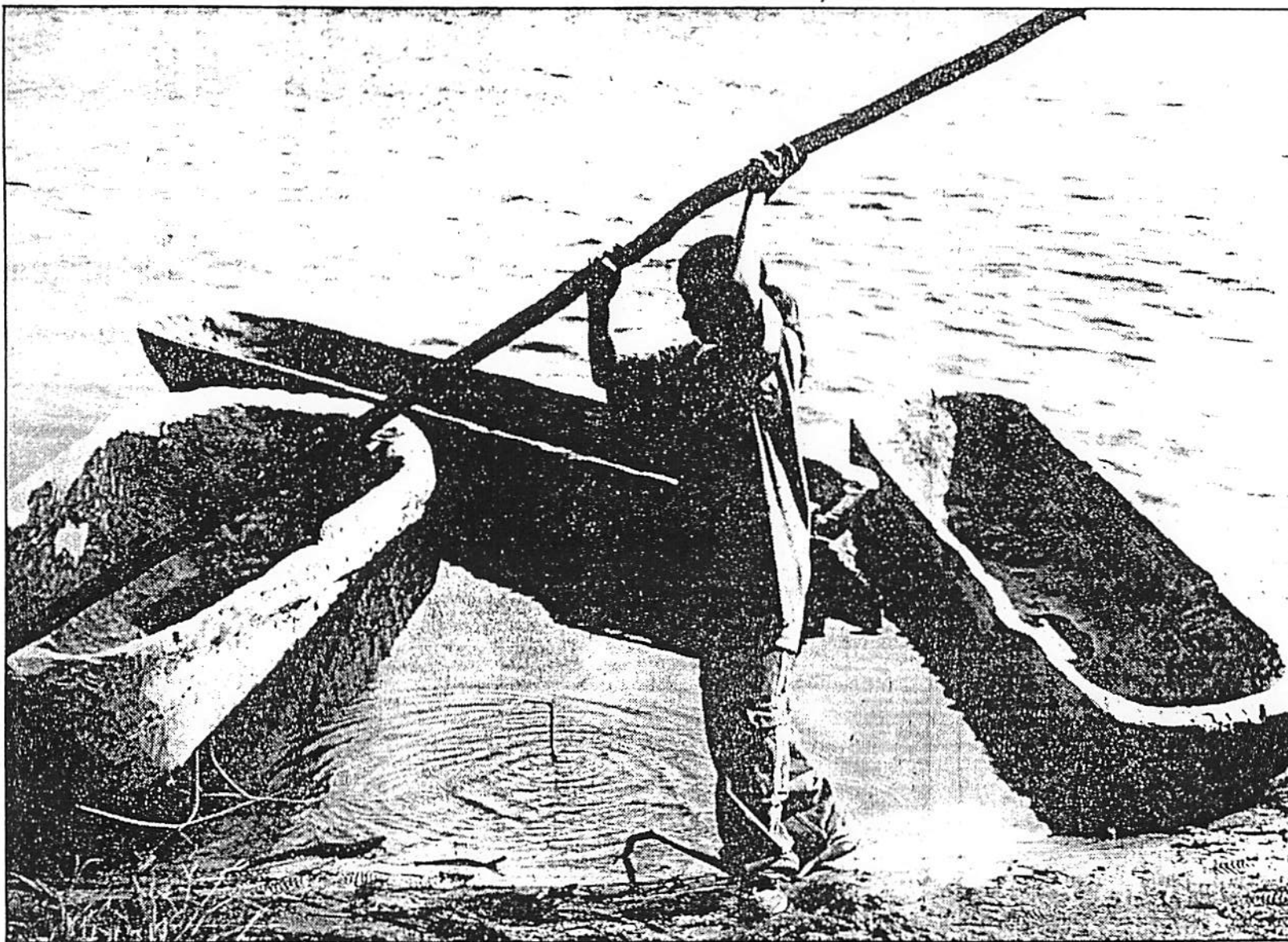
"A lot of us young ones are still learning a lot of things," Jackson said. "The first step is getting our heritage down."



Dove is one of a group of women who act out episodes from Wampanoag and Quaker history.



A basket of corn sits on the ground as visitors view a display.



Debee Tlumacki photos/The Patriot Ledger

Eleven-year-old Klowa Spears prepares primitive boats during the two-day seminar to show how the Wampanoag ancestors went fishing.